

"SOULS ON FIRE"

A Story of Russian Intrigue, Love and Adventure

CHAPTER XV

The Escape

By LOUIS TRACY—Author of {"The Wings of the Morning," "The Pillar of Light," Etc.

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THE sensational incidents in the chapel roused Ermyntrude out of a waking dream. Her marriage was unreal, a mask of pretext, which, however binding it might be in a legal sense, needed the ratification of her own conscience before she would consent to regard the ceremony as other than a trick justified only by the end it would serve.

But into its incongruous surroundings suddenly was projected a note of personal danger. The forbidding aspect, the fierce and defiant cry of the man in the gallery, were far more terrifying to her than the grotesque antics of a metal plaque, in which her incredulous eyes at once detected the face and arm of a human being.

Not knowing what the stranger said, she imagined that it was his warning and not the wonder-working icon which sent the Russians flying, panic-stricken, to the exit. Moreover, the overturning of candelabra and the throwing down of torches plunged the chapel into a fearsome gloom. She saw Prince Boris sent headlong to the stone floor with an assailant on top of him. The astonished Prior was pitched sprawling into a recess, while his acolytes were fighting with the Cossacks to gain the safety of the courtyard.

Little wonder that she should be alarmed by the commotion! When some one caught her arm she shrieked aloud for help; but a strong English voice said:

"Have no fear, Lady Ermyntrude! It is I, Frank Armstrong. I am helping your friends to rescue you. Come with me!"

Though this wonderful thing had happened, she could not refuse the evidence of her senses. She knew Armstrong's voice: even in the dim light afforded by a few solitary candles she recognized his face. Conscious only of a great joy that here was one whom she could trust, she yielded instantly to his gentle pressure on her arm, went with him into the vestry, and when he asked her to follow him through what looked like the open door of a large cupboard, obeyed unhesitatingly. He held her tightly, as the darkness in front was impenetrable.

"We are in a level corridor," he whispered. "Now that you are safe there soon will be a light."

There was a rush of footsteps behind them, a door was slammed and bolted, and a man carrying a dark lantern flashed its rays on them.

"That was neatly done," he said, with a quiet laugh. "The lady is not going to faint, I hope?"

He spoke French, so Ermyntrude assured him instantly that she was more surprised than frightened.

"Follow me," he rejoined. "We have no time to lose. They soon will recover their wits, and a few worm-eaten boards will not keep them in check long."

He led the way rapidly along narrow passages and down steep stone stairs. There was no delay for questioning or explanation. A score of men followed Ermyntrude and Armstrong, and their hurried movements showed that even in these forgotten labyrinths of the ruined castle they did not deem themselves safe from speedy pursuit. At last the descent became so continuous and the air so musty, without a tinge of the crisp, tingling cold without, that Ermyntrude said to her companion:

"Where are you taking me?"

"To your father and brother." He could have given no more amazing answer.

"I promised to marry Prince Melnikoff as the

The synopsis of preceding chapters will be found at the end of this instalment on page 18.



"Follow Me!" He Rejoined... "A Few Worm-Eaten Boards Will Not Keep Them in Check Long"

price of their deliverance. Did he deceive me to the last?" she said.

"Not knowingly, perhaps. It was not in his power to free them."

"But my father wrote to me. I have his letter."

"Surely Lord Valletort never would sanction such a compact?"

"He did, in a sense. You must not blame him. Perhaps you are acting under a wrong belief. Can we not stop a moment? It is not yet too late to set the case right."

She felt his twinge of indecision. Had he been drawn into a desperate adventure merely to serve the ends of political deperados? Had he meddled foolishly in an affair fraught with dire consequence to those whom he wished to befriend?

"In another minute we shall reach the place where an underground passage emerges into the thicket," he said. "The end of the way is so narrow and difficult that pursuit can be stopped by one man. There we can halt and decide what should be done."

It was as he had said. They climbed a broken stair ending in a tumbled-down arch. A gust of cold air showed that they were nearing the outer world once more. The darkness was overpowering, but the tiny gleam of the lanterns carried by their guide and by some of the men who formed their escort fell on the trunks of trees and the interlaced branches of the huge thorny bushes for which the district is famous. Ready hands were beginning to pile several big stones in front of the half-buried doorway when Armstrong bade them desist.

"The English lady says it may be necessary for her to return. You must await her pleasure," he explained.

There were murmurs of astonished protest; but he who acted as leader said in a low tone:

"Not so loud, my friend. We are not yet out of danger. What folly is this?"

"Lady Ermyntrude has received a letter from her father. He counsels her to marry Prince Melnikoff, and she is agreeable to that course."

"No, no!" she interrupted. "I consented to marry him, in name only, to save the lives of my father and brother."

"He was playing on a girl's fears," was the angry retort. "Not even a Russian Governor would dare to murder a British peer and his son in cold blood in order to gain his ends. In any event, your relatives are not in his power now. Their jailers are either dead or captives themselves by this time. Your readiness to accept Prince Melnikoff's statements, young lady, left us no option but to proceed to extremities."

"You do not know what you are saying," she said, keenly alive to the injustice of his doubt concerning her motives. "I am here because I re-

cognized in Mr. Armstrong one in whom I might trust. To him alone do I give any explanation of my actions; but I demand in the first place some reasonable cause why such explanation should be forthcoming."

"That can be supplied readily," said Frank, who was utterly taken aback by the extraordinary turn of events. "I happened to be in Moscow. I telegraphed to your brother, and received a reply from Prince Melnikoff which I now know to have been a lie. There are in Bannofka and elsewhere many men who are banded together against him, some for personal reasons, others because they are hostile to the system he represents. It seems they knew some, at

least, of his secrets, as their emissaries found me in Moscow, where Prince Melnikoff's spies were watching me too.

I was told that you had refused his highness's offer of marriage; that he had determined to force you to marry him; and that his own retainers, acting under his orders, carried off your father and brother, so as to frighten you into compliance with his wishes. There cannot be the slightest doubt that this is so. Since I left the trail near Saratoff last evening I have heard so many details from the men who planned your rescue that I am wholly convinced their story is true. Yet, Lady Ermyntrude, if these drastic steps were not necessary—"

"Oh, do not be hard on me!" she pleaded, for her own knowledge, fortified by her suspicions, bore out each word spoken by Armstrong. "See, here is my father's letter. I could not choose but believe him."

Frank was softened by the pathos in her voice. So she too was suffering! She would have sacrificed herself for the sake of those she loved!

"You are in an extraordinary predicament, I admit," he said. "It is quite true that if you were the Princess Melnikoff at this moment the lives of your father and brother would be in greater danger than they were before. These men are outlaws. They know every yard of the forest. They are better acquainted with the castle and palace of Bannofka than Prince Boris himself. This evening nearly a thousand men surrounded the monastery in which the captives were lodged, and it is practically certain that they would carry the place at the first rush."

"Monastery?" almost shrieked Ermyntrude. "Is it the monastery at Dukhof?"

The French-speaking Russian, who had followed their eager words with the utmost impatience, seemed to grasp the meaning of her despairing cry.

"Yes," he said fiercely. "Aristocrats and monks ever will be found on the same side. You have been thoroughly deluded, mademoiselle. Do you wish to return to your worthy Prince? If so, you must decide quickly."

His discourteous speech no longer evoked resentment. Rather was she conscious that she owed an apology to this man and his companions who had dared so much for her sake.

"Never!" she cried. "Take me to my father! He will tell you how he too has been shamefully misled."

"It is well," was the answer, given a trifle more graciously. "We have no time to lose. The hounds are on our track."

The action of the men grouped near the arch showed that he did not speak without good cause. Several of them toppled a giant boulder into the